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# Reentry Mapping Brief

## ***Mapping Community Data on Children of Prisoners: Strategies and Insights***

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The Reentry Mapping Network (RMN) is a partnership between the Urban Institute and community-based organizations in 15 jurisdictions<sup>1</sup> that are analyzing and mapping local data on prisoner reentry and related topics and using the findings to improve their communities. One purpose of the RMN is to develop and disseminate best practices for the local mapping and analysis of prisoner reentry data.<sup>2</sup> This brief, the second in a series, is a part of that effort and is designed to inform the work of local organizations on these important issues. The brief is based on the experiences of the RMN sites since the project's inception in 2001.

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**For more information on justice mapping and the RMN, visit <http://www.reentrymapping.org>.**

An estimated 1.7 million children nationwide have a parent currently incarcerated in state or federal prison (Glaze and Maruschak 2008). When this estimate is expanded to include parents incarcerated in local jails, on probation, or on parole, estimates suggest that the number jumps to 7.5 million affected children (Mumola 2006). Unfortunately, little comprehensive data exist on these children and their experiences and needs. Because data sources vary from state to state, local-level analyses may offer the most promising venue for learning about this population. This policy brief discusses the analysis and mapping of local data on children whose parents are involved in the criminal justice system. The brief begins by highlighting the value of such efforts and then outlines potential data sources and methods for analyzing and mapping information on this population. The report is based on input from the Reentry Mapping Network (RMN) sites about their efforts to map and understand parental incarceration in their communities.

### **WHY ANALYZE AND MAP DATA ON CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS?**

The experience of having a parent incarcerated, compounded by the attendant stress it creates for the entire family, has been found to produce a range of negative impacts on children. Children may suffer from emotional, developmental, and behavioral difficulties; their caregivers and other family members are often burdened with increased financial and emotional stress; and the entire family must face the social stigma of having a family member incarcerated (La Vigne et al. 2008; Davies et al. 2008). Some studies also suggest that children of incarcerated parents are at increased risk for criminal justice system involvement later in life (Murray and Farrington 2007).

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Despite the significant vulnerabilities parental incarceration creates for families, very little quantitative data exist on the number of children of incarcerated parents or their experiences and needs. This population of children is almost invisible, as schools, child protective agencies, and other social service agencies are often unaware when a child they serve has a parent behind bars. Similarly, departments of corrections frequently have little to no information about the children of the inmates in their charge.

Understanding these children and their needs is critical for policymakers and service providers hoping to mitigate the effects of parental incarceration. Mapping and analysis of local data on children of incarcerated parents can inform policymakers and advocates on the impact of incarceration on children and families in their communities. For some children, parental incarceration may be one vulnerability among many, and mapping can highlight the overlap between parental incarceration and poverty, failing schools, poor health, and other challenges.

An examination of the geographic distribution of children with incarcerated parents, as well as an analysis of their needs, can help government and nonprofit agencies that serve children better understand this special population. Such analyses can assist agencies in improving the delivery of services to these children. Mapping can help identify where populations of children of incarcerated parents spatially align with other social service delivery efforts. For example, mapping the locations of children of incarcerated parents in conjunction with the locations of households receiving public benefits, such as food stamps, can serve as a persuasive visual device illustrating the importance of service agency collaboration.

Over the past several years, Reentry Mapping Network partners and other organizations around the country have mapped local patterns of incarceration and reentry. Mapping and analyzing data on the families of persons involved in the criminal justice

system is a logical extension of this work. These new analyses are important in their own right, however, because geographic patterns of the residences of children with incarcerated parents may differ from reentry and incarceration patterns. For example, reentry maps often show concentrations of returning prisoners in areas where homeless shelters and transitional housing centers are located (often in city centers), yet the children of these returning prisoners—most of whom are living with relatives<sup>3</sup>—may be living in more residential neighborhoods. Mapping and analyzing data specific to these children, rather than their parents, can reveal new information about the local impact of incarceration and reentry on families.

#### **ADDITIONAL URBAN INSTITUTE RESEARCH ON CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS**

Other Urban Institute publications on parental incarceration are listed below. They are all available online at [www.urban.org](http://www.urban.org).

***Broken Bonds: Understanding and Addressing the Needs of Children with Incarcerated Parents (La Vigne et al. 2008).*** A review of the existing research on parental incarceration and its impact on children.

***Understanding the Experiences and Needs of Children of Incarcerated Parents: Views from Mentors (Davies et al. 2008).*** A presentation of findings from focus groups with mentors working with children of incarcerated parents.

***Using Local Data to Explore the Experiences and Needs of Children of Incarcerated Parents (Brazzell 2008).*** A discussion of the efforts of three sites to merge and analyze local data in order to learn more about children of incarcerated parents in their jurisdictions.

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## POTENTIAL DATA SOURCES

The experiences of the RMN partners indicate that few agencies or organizations are keeping reliable, thorough data on children of incarcerated parents. The data that do exist come primarily from criminal justice or social service agencies, and occasionally from academic research efforts. The quality and availability of the data from these sources, however, varies greatly from state to state. Creating a comprehensive local picture of children of incarcerated parents may require combining data from multiple sources, a process which will be outlined in the next section. First, however, we discuss the main sources of data on children of incarcerated parents.

### *Criminal Justice Data on Inmates*

While many state departments of correction (DOCs) collect little or no data on the children and families of inmates, some are beginning to maintain more extensive data on these groups. The Rhode Island Department of Corrections (DOC), for example, recently began asking inmates at intake for detailed information on their family members and children. The new inmate intake questionnaire requests the following data on each inmate's children:

- Child's name, sex, and age
- Inmate's relationship to child (biological, stepchild, etc.)
- Name of child's other parent
- Contact information for child's current guardian
- Child's address
- Whether child lives with inmate's family

The questionnaire also has open-ended questions on child support orders, court ordered visitation, and Department of Children, Youth, and Families involvement. RMN partner The Providence Plan hopes to begin analyzing these data in the coming months, in part to support the DOC's efforts to connect these children with services.

The family data that DOCs have often come from risk assessment instruments or other questionnaires like the one described above, which are typically conducted when an inmate enters the correctional system. DOC datasets usually contain a range of other data on inmates, including demographic information, criminal history, in-prison behavior, program participation, and, in some cases, data on educational level and employment and substance abuse history. Such data can provide valuable contextual information about the incarcerated parents. Accessing inmate data typically involves submitting a formal data request to the DOC, a process outlined in detail in the RMN publication *Mapping Prisoner Reentry: An Action Research Guidebook* (La Vigne et al. 2006). Expanding the analysis to include children of all parents involved in the criminal justice system often requires seeking data from parole and probation agencies and local jails.

### *Social Service Agency Data on Children*

The other primary source of information on children of incarcerated parents is agencies that work with children, most commonly departments of children and family services or child protective services, local departments of health and human services, and schools. These agencies maintain various levels of data on the parents of the children they serve, and may or may not track whether a child's parents are incarcerated or otherwise involved in the justice system. One clear advantage of data from these sources, in comparison to corrections data, is that they contain more detailed information on the children and their experiences. A description of the work of the RMN partner in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania is presented in the text box on page 6 as an example of the value of using social service agency data for understanding this population.

Obtaining data from social services agencies, as with departments of correction, will typically involve a formal data request. Because the data concern children and, depending on the data source, may contain protected health information, a formal plan for

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preserving confidentiality and ensuring the security of the data is desirable and may be required by the agency releasing the data.

#### *Archived Data from Research*

A less common but potentially valuable source of data is any research study or dataset that tracks data on local children. If available, studies specifically focused on children of incarcerated parents, as well as more general youth development cohort studies that track children over time, can provide a wealth of information on this population. These studies often track the outcomes of children and thus may be particularly useful for understanding the long-term impacts of parental incarceration on local children. In Pittsburgh, for example, the RMN partner was able to analyze data on a subset of children of incarcerated parents from the Pittsburgh Youth Study, a federally funded longitudinal study of local boys. Those interested in exploring such studies should be aware that their existence is limited and, when available, gaining access to the data may be difficult. Nonetheless, such data are typically rich and very useful so their availability is worth exploring.

#### *Original Data Collection*

Last but not least, the option exists for an organization to collect its own local data on children of incarcerated parents. Such data might be obtained through a study of these children, or by incorporating questions on children and family into a study of incarcerated or formerly incarcerated persons. A study of local children and/or their incarcerated parents could involve surveys, interviews, focus groups, counts, or some combination of these data collection mechanisms. Primary data collection efforts are, of course, a much more expensive and involved undertaking than many of the options listed above. An organization must have a vision of how it will use the data and should design a study that best suits those purposes.

When conducting its reentry mapping project, The Piton Foundation in Denver found that state DOC data on returning prisoners were too limited to address its research questions. Piton

undertook its own study of reentry in the local area, surveying and conducting focus groups with people in prison and on parole, as well as local service providers.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the Pittsburgh Child Guidance Foundation collected primary data on children of incarcerated parents to supplement the information obtained by their collaborator (and RMN partner) the Allegheny County Department of Human Services. The Foundation surveyed parents in the Allegheny County jail; conducted focus groups with children of incarcerated parents, their caregivers, formerly incarcerated parents, and service providers; and interviewed local child advocates and criminal justice stakeholders.<sup>5</sup>

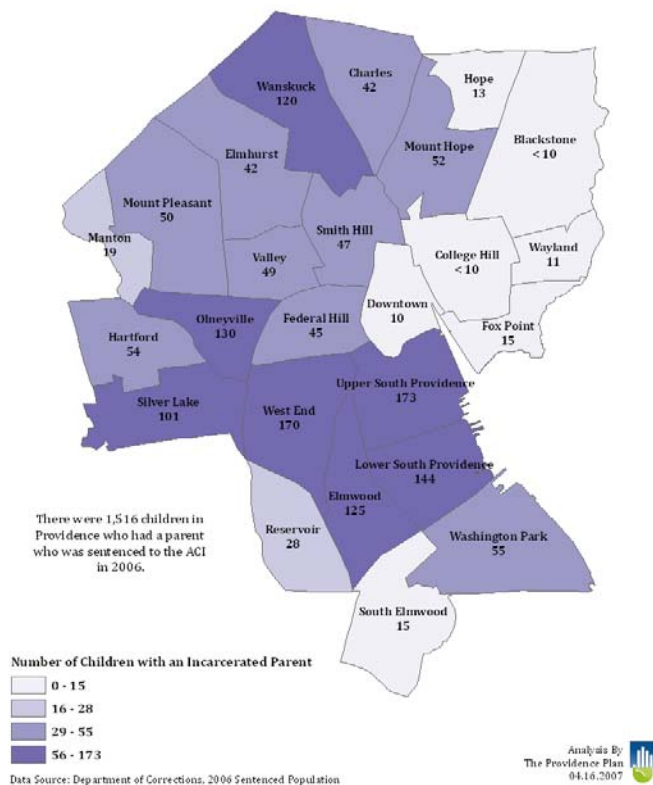
## WORKING WITH THE DATA

**T**he most common method for learning more about the local population of children with incarcerated parents is to analyze data from corrections and social service agencies. The opportunities for data analysis will be determined by the types of data available and accessible and the possibilities that exist for merging and combining data from multiple sources. Below we discuss some of the main issues involved in working with data from government agencies.

The description and mapping of children of current or former prisoners using data from departments of corrections or other criminal justice agencies is often a good starting point and can lay the foundation for any broader analysis effort. The case study on page 5 of The Providence Plan's work provides an excellent example of a basic analysis using corrections data. Such an analysis requires understanding and working within the limitations of the corrections dataset. A key issue is the accuracy and completeness of the data on children, which depend on reliable self-reporting by inmates and diligent recording of responses by correctional personnel. Even accurate data are typically limited to numbers and ages of children and are unlikely to reveal anything about the nature of the parent-child relationship prior to incarceration, such as whether the parent and

### Number of Children of Recently Sentenced Parents By Neighborhood, Providence, 2006

Incarcerated parents are parents who were sentenced in 2006.



### CASE STUDY: USING CORRECTIONS DATA

RMN partner **The Providence Plan** obtained data from the Rhode Island Department of Corrections as part of its reentry mapping project. The DOC data contained only a self-reported number of children for each inmate, with no additional information on the children's ages or family situations. Despite these limitations, The Providence Plan researchers used the available data to provide a basic overview of the location of children of incarcerated parents in Rhode Island. Having already mapped the inmates' addresses at the time of their arrest, the researchers produced counts of children for each city in Rhode Island and each neighborhood in Providence. The map at left shows the geographic distribution in Providence of children of inmates sentenced in 2006. The counts of children, along with data on the parents' race, sentenced or pre-trial status, and offense type, were included in the *2006 Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Factbook*, an annual report on the status of children in the state (Rhode Island Kids Count 2006).

child lived together, whether the parent had custody of the child, or how involved the parent was in the child's life. This is particularly true in the case of fathers, who are less likely to have been the primary caregiver for their children before incarceration.

Address data can also be unreliable, and mapping children based on their parent's address at the time of arrest assumes that the child lived with the parent prior to his or her incarceration and has not since moved. Despite these limitations, mapping corrections data to display the geographic distribution of children of inmates is a simple way to obtain an overview of the local dynamics of parental incarceration. This work is particularly easy to complete if the addresses of the incarcerated parents have already been geocoded as part of other mapping efforts.

Learning more about the children themselves, beyond their ages and locations, will typically require data from social service agencies such as schools, child welfare agencies, local human services departments, or private and nonprofit service providers. Depending on the agency, such datasets may provide information on each child's demographic characteristics, current and previous addresses, socioeconomic background, family situation, educational history, and use of social services and government benefits. If these agencies also track the criminal justice involvement of the parents of children they serve, analyzing and mapping data on the subset of children with incarcerated parents is a relatively straightforward proposition. Datasets that include criminal justice information on parents also present the opportunity to compare the subset of children with incarcerated parents to other children in

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the dataset not affected by parental incarceration.

In many cases, however, social service agencies do not track parental incarceration, and those that do may use a simple yes/no variable, with no dates, sentence lengths, or other contextual information on the incarceration. Additionally, many agencies only track data on mothers and/or custodial parents, meaning data for incarcerated fathers may be particularly weak. In these cases, providing the most comprehensive picture of the experiences of children with incarcerated parents usually requires merging data across multiple sources. Data from the criminal justice system provide information on the parents and their criminal histories and incarcerations, while social service agency datasets provide a picture of the children and their circumstances. Combining multiple datasets in this manner can allow for the understanding of families as units who have multiple points of contact with government agencies, including the criminal justice system, the child protective system, and local social services.

The key to this type of analysis is linking the datasets. A previous Urban Institute report (Brazzell 2008) provides a detailed review of the efforts of three sites to merge and analyze administrative data to learn more about children of incarcerated parents in their jurisdictions. Many issues are involved in such an effort and a brief review of the major concerns is included below. The sidebar to the right also includes information on the data merging activities of the RMN partner in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania.

In order to merge datasets, researchers must develop a method for linking individuals from the same family. This can be complicated by the fact that criminal justice datasets may not include the full names of the children, and social service agency datasets may not include the names of parents, particularly fathers and/or noncustodial parents. Developing an algorithm that matches on multiple pieces of identifying information may

be the best solution in these cases. Another alternative is to use an intermediate dataset, such as birth records, that links parents to children. The particular method used will depend largely on the available data. Subsequent analyses should detail the limitations of the data and the merging methods used, indicating, for example, whether the analysis provides an undercount or overcount of local children with incarcerated parents. Any possible biases, such as more complete data on mothers than fathers, should also be documented.

### CASE STUDY: MERGING DATASETS

RMN partner the **Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS)** recently conducted research on local children whose mothers had a history of bookings in the Allegheny County Jail. DHS maintains a data warehouse that links data from multiple state and local sources and includes information on criminal justice involvement, child welfare cases, clients of county human services, and use of public benefits. The data warehouse links multiple records for individuals and their family members across datasets. Records are matched using a complex algorithm that compares first and last name, date of birth, race, gender, and Social Security number.

The data warehouse allows DHS to look at families as units and explore their encounters with various government agencies, including the criminal justice system. DHS was able to analyze the foster care experiences of children with incarcerated mothers and the timing of the mothers' jail bookings in relation to foster care placement. They were also able to compare outcomes for children whose mothers had a jail history and children whose mothers did not. More information on the DHS research efforts can be found in *Using Local Data to Explore the Experiences and Needs of Children of Incarcerated Parents* (Brazzell 2008).

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## MAPPING THE DATA

Once the data have been obtained, cleaned, and merged, analysis and mapping can begin. The key maps will likely be similar to those produced as part of other community-level mapping projects, such as reentry mapping efforts. They may show concentrations of children, in both absolute numbers and as a percentage of all children; contextualize these concentrations by mapping community-level sociodemographic characteristics such as race, income, education level, and use of public assistance; and compare these concentrations with the location of service providers who serve these children's needs. Given the population being analyzed, certain maps may be particularly relevant, such as maps showing schools/school districts and the distribution of single-parent households. Detailed information on mapping principles and techniques can be found in *Mapping Prisoner Reentry: An Action Research Guidebook* (La Vigne et al. 2006).

When analyzing and mapping data on this population, especially for products that will be released to the public, particular caution needs to be exercised to protect the confidentiality and privacy of the children. Personal identifiers should never be used and exact addresses may need to be blurred or otherwise screened on maps. More information on protecting confidentiality can also be found in the *Mapping Prisoner Reentry* guidebook (La Vigne et al. 2006).

## CONCLUSION

As the nation's prison population continues to grow, particularly for women,<sup>6</sup> documenting the impact of incarceration on children and families will be increasingly important. Using maps to provide a visual overview of the issue can, over time, create a foundation for more detailed local analyses of the outcomes for affected children. Analyses that track foster care placements, service needs, and

educational outcomes can provide a fuller picture of the impact of having a parent incarcerated. This can help policymakers and service providers better understand the needs of affected children and how those needs can be met.

The many limitations and gaps in the data outlined above make it clear that much remains to be done to provide better documentation of these children and their needs. Such information is an essential first step to ensuring those needs are met. Any type of local analysis of children of incarcerated parents, no matter how rudimentary, helps to make these children visible to policymakers, service providers, and the public. Such efforts will encourage the criminal justice system and other local and state agencies to begin taking their needs into consideration.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The RMN partner jurisdictions are Allegheny County, Pennsylvania; Atlanta, Georgia; Chicago, Illinois; Denver, Colorado; Des Moines, Iowa; Hartford, Connecticut; Indianapolis, Indiana; Louisville, Kentucky; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Oakland, California; Providence, Rhode Island; San Diego, California; Seattle, Washington; Washington, D.C.; and Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

<sup>2</sup> For more comprehensive information on reentry mapping and the experiences of the RMN sites, see *Mapping Prisoner Reentry: An Action Research Guidebook* (La Vigne et al. 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Glaze and Maruschak (2008) report that the vast majority of children with an incarcerated parent are living with their other parent, a grandparent, or another relative.

<sup>4</sup> Results from the Piton Foundation's study were published in their Spring 2007 newsletter (The Piton Foundation 2007).

<sup>5</sup> See Walker (2005) for a summary of the project and its findings.

<sup>6</sup> From 1995 to 2005, the number of women incarcerated in state and federal prison increased by 57 percent, while the number of men increased by 34 percent (Harrison and Beck 2006).



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